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SPELL FOR NEW GRASSES

By

Nancy Hunter

B.A., Lewis-Clark State College, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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SPELL FOR NEW GRASSES

Poems and Translations

by Nancy Hunter

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CRAB CREEK REVIEW
CUTBANK
FRONTIERS
POETRY NORTHWEST
SLACKWATER REVIEW
SNAPDRAGON
WIND

Photography by Jean Arthur

Calligraphy by Nancy Hunter

for Marion, Dan, Pat, and Rose

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

Robert Duncan

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ONE

Where We Live

Today the sky's steady gaze
picked me out of a crowd like someone
I'd try hard to name and have to look aside
and everything moved as though
the day had been rehearsing a long time
without me.
Down the street a mail truck lurched in and out of
the leafy shadows, and children waved, laying out
their small town around gnarled roots of an elm.
Somewhere a screen door complained,
a sprinkler worried in spring heat
that like a stray once fed, stays on.
And across the way
the Greek lady spoke in her green tongue
to a perfect rose
then shaded her eyes to watch tender wisps
rise up the chimney brick
while over in the shade, her husband dozed
and dreamed white blossoms of his youth, cool bursts
extinguished in the long wet grass at his feet.
An ant lost itself in the folds of a petal
and a breeze carried off the scent of peonies, noon chimes
from the Presbyterian Church, the lumbering voice
of the woman next door. Why am I going on so?
I'm trying to speak of this home sweet ennui built
of the close at hand, the predictable
that becomes strangely distant, as when in the mirror
you catch a look in your own eyes,
as when an old dog picks up finally and leaves.

Misfortune

You watch the lean bodies riding low
past your door, reach out to stroke a sharp muzzle.
Its snarl is the one you've wanted to hear.

Things That Ride on Wind

They had snakes,
dry-land mosquitoes and sagebrush, a few
outbuildings hunkered down
east of Winnet on gumbo soil
and a dream: fat cattle and sons with spirit
like the black horse
my stepfather couldn't tame.

In the lean-to kitchen
Mother shook down ashes and built new
fire. Carried from the windmill
two pails for balance
the half mile down,
babies that never came to term
and she went on.

As she filled the galvanized tub
and pulled the stick handle on the old machine
her body swayed
like the clover rocking on wind.
She listened to the water's swirl and savored
the smell of Ivory lifting with steam.

When she poured along the caked ground
the salt and dust we'd worn,
her skirt billowed out
and she believed as it passed
only wind crawls in the sage
and dies there. Believed
it would rise again
in fetlocks and long dark manes.

The Strawberry Roan

Over miles brushed with sage
we'd sing that song, every verse
followed by a chorus of your memories,
days on the Laramie Plains,
horses broke, horses stolen.
Summer sun confirmed
the redskin in your face. You fought
about that once or twice, more often
about horses, your pride
in their blood lines. Your imagination
was held in a few seconds:
gate number two opening on your world,
man and horse blurred into one
sharing a memory that
chased, choked like dust only
whiskey could settle. For a moment
you must have seen a blaze like
the glint of a hundred hooves, heard
feathers in the zinging rope.
You must have felt the keen edge of iron
against your teeth, in your spine.
Then the race rushed past
your face into that now. Only
strong drink, strong words
and stronger fists measured a man.
I remember all those verses.

Rabbit

His momma's domestic
and his daddy's wild and damn
I can't stand to see him penned
so he roams she says and drives
the neighbors wild
and she hangs her great
laugh above us
where it shimmers
like the August day and the bronze hill
he knows
and she says look I told 'em he
owns himself and they gave up that
cause
but you know the church
ladies came then
said they'd seen cars out front
some nights whole weekends and what about
my children why
what example was I
setting and didn't I feel rather like
a rabbit and I breathed deep said
(and the air rings out again puts new
luster on the hill)
well yes
I rather do

Portrait of the Sorority Sisters' Musicale

Mr. Dudley stands stiff as his collar,
presiding over the silent musicale,
tirelessly posing white prairie flowers for
lives cultured and orderly as pearls
circling demure swan necks.
There they are:
ruffled rows of testament to
his faith in the arts.

But the willowy witnesses could not remain
perched on a Persian rug,
hands twined on mute instruments.
Turning to the song of the wind,
they scattered,
seedlings for the sparse, dry flats.

When hands less like petals
took the souvenir
from the trunk, and eyes less dreamy
looked on the patron, perhaps
a wilted belle remarked,
Mr. Dudley, starched lilies don't grow in this soil
and sagebrush blooms for such a short time.

Still he stands
like a grace note
poised over their lives.

Butter and Egg Money

Sundown, the usual blaze, and Mom
casting grain as she might
the riches she imagines.
She clucks to strutting Rhode Island Reds,
calls them her little women, because
on this land, moody as her man at supper,
they answer,
eat from her rough open hand.

All week I gather, she stores
in the cool dark cellar
and she turns them as though
each shell has its own delicate orbit, turns
them again, and as gently.

Saturday, we load crates and cream cans
and Mom puts on her red, new-made dress,
a mouth to match.
We ride ten dusty miles to trade with the grocer,
the Italian with bourbon in the back,
the shy and freckled dairy man:
eggs at the current price, cream a ratio to butter
and my mother's ample smile
thrown in.
And when her skirt crackles and flares,
they smile back, saying
you have a deal.

At table there's talk of loose fence,
the wall-eyed cow and rain
as she puts on a cube like soft gold
and in silence, takes her usual place.

Catfish Rising in the Snake

As the bluff pulled night down on the water
and dropped the quivering wings of bats
to hum its flow, we waited, still,
for the first long forms to rise.
We knew they lay deep and scaleless as they had
before time was measured,
moving surely by the sweep of their feelers,
their daggered fins, teeth
taking in all their dim eyes miss.

We caught nothing,
but we were defined when we circled in firelight,
our palms open to flame that
crackled across driftwood and small talk,
stroked and left faces to the dark.
A few kicks of sand, and night
brushed against our legs
as we climbed the bank, hearing at our backs
the river cutting its same course, overhead, the high whine
of the last flight in.
I felt for my watch, noted the four luminous numbers,
the blurring
contour of my wrist, and kept on climbing.

Poem About a Horse

He studied me, his eye, a magnifying glass,
but he took me on, a small annoyance rippling his hide.
I sat not knowing why I'd chosen to mount him
bred so thoroughly to the ideal:
grace in every line, power
flexed in each stride.
Together, we noted miles of fence, the way
grass shimmered and parted in green
deference, blue
yawning on its edge. Then
his ear twitched in the breeze,
at some reminder of excellence
and he ran, looping wide
like a hawk preying, while I
kept the saddle, too proud to quit
till his neck and the fence leaned as if
sharing a secret. Letting go was a surprise:
a reverse pirouette and leap, its apex in
a green cloud from which
he'll reappear when I'm ready.

North of Roundup, 1952

We come out of the earth
and the grass, and aspire
to the light.

John Haines
 for my daughters

From grass shoulder high she is waving, saying O
 these are good times--all this
 and a cattle market on the rise--
 as the summer sun traces wind
 in the curling blades and Mother's dark hair.

In the margin you can't see
 a country road, dust that boils
 when the bottom falls out,
 her husband gone off to town, drunk three days running
 and gambling, racing ponies all over again
 in a dim back room
 as though they could chase away failure.

Others leave for good: Eleanor, round-faced
 and yellow-haired,
 who rests her elbows on Mom's enameled table and listens
 till a new job comes up near Lewistown.
 And there's the hired man Burt, who jokes
 at sullen mealtimes.
 Says her laughter reminds him of clouds,
 the way they swirl high and graceful, and he means it.
 He moves on. Then

I marry young, so young her only chance
 to go through me another way
 seems a trail of dust and gone.
 I see her wave then shield her eyes, watch
 until she seems stunted, bound
 to land no picture can ever show.

If, in a white corner, there were a tree
 or gentle rise, I would point it out
 but this is dry land and flat,
 country we all come to, with grass
 that grows in cycles: The barn cats full
 and sassy then hungry and mean.

We do have this picture:

One woman who knew well
the land's contour. In her place
I take in the scent of timothy and dust motes,
hold it long before I breathe it out.
Listen, you may hear clouds, great white swirls,
she is coming up out of grass, right arm
raised in a sign of triumph
or recognition, mouth
a round burn above the green.

TWO

Ten Poems by Li Shang-yin



錦瑟



錦瑟無端五十絃
 一絃一柱思華年
 莊生曉夢迷蝴蝶
 望帝春心託杜鵑
 滄海月明珠有淚
 藍田日暖生玉煙
 此情可待成追憶
 只是當時已惘然

The Ornamental Zither

Why should the ornamental zither have fifty strings,
each string, each peg, a resonance of flowery years?

Chuang Tsu wakes from daydream,
doubting the butterfly.
Wang Ti's amorous heart is transformed into a nightjar.
Under a bright moon in the cold sea,
dew weeps pearls.
Under a warm sun on Indigo Mountain, jade forms mist.

If only I could wait
till my feelings are memory.
But already the present wheels and drifts.



風

撥銀般孔雀
 惱帶拂兒鳥
 羅薦誼散近
 宵時鎖洞房

Wind

It lifts my hairpin, circling the peacock.
It worries my sash, brushing against the paired mandarins.
Who asked you to come to my sleeping mat?
It's fasting time, my secluded chamber's locked.

嫦娥



雲月屏風燭影深
長河漸落曉星深
嫦娥倦恹偷靈藥
碧海青天夜夜心

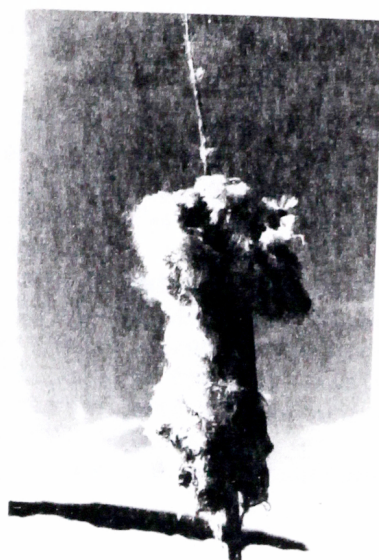
The Lady in the Moon

In candlelight shadows deepen
on the mica clouds in banks
across my screen.

The Milky Way slowly falls.
The morning star sinks.

Chang O must regret stealing
the drink of immortality,
condemned every night to
the jade green sea, blue sky.

無題



鳳尾香羅薄幾重
 碧文圓頂夜深縫
 扇裁月魄羞難掩
 車起雷聲語未通
 曾是寂寥金燼暗
 斷無消息石榴紅
 斑駁只輕垂楊在
 何處西南任好風

[Silk of scented phoenix tail lies in thin folds]

Silk of scented phoenix tail lies in thin folds.
Hunched within the green brocade canopy,
she sews all through the long nights.
Her fan, like a slice of the moon's soul,
can't hide her shame--
When his carriage rolled out, their words
had been carried off in the sound of thunder.
In the silence the candle already flickers.
No word has come to justify the red wedding wine.
By the river bank his dappled horses are still tied
to the courtesan's drooping willow.
How can she wait for news, a good Southwest wind?

暮秋獨遊曲江

荷葉生時春恨生
荷葉枯時秋恨成
深知身有情長在
悵望江頭江水聲



Visiting the Winding River Alone in Late Autumn

When the lotus leaves come out
my regrets spring up.
When the leaves wither
my sadness is full.
I know all my life
I'll carry these feelings.
I give up, watch the winding river,
listen to the flow.

房中曲



薔薇泣血素翠帶花錢小
 嬌郎癡花雲抱日西簾曉
 枕是龍宮石割得秋波色
 玉簫先弄水膚但見蒙羅碧
 憶得前年春未語含悲辛
 歸來已不見錦瑟長於人
 今日澗底松明日山頭磻
 愁到天池翻相看不相識

From the Middle Room

In shade red roses sob and grow plain
and too soon the elms' green coins
are spent, but I'm foolish as a boy, a crimson cloud
wanting to hug sunset until dawn.
The pillow, like a dragon from mansions under the sea,
has captured your eyes clear as autumn waves.
But the jade mat has lost your tender flesh
covered only by green silk.

I remember spring, year before last--
Choking back sadness, you said nothing.
Now I've come home and you're gone.
The ornamented zither has outlived you
and I'll mourn until earth and sky trade places,
until I see but no longer recognize your face:
Today a pine's reflection in the brook,
tomorrow a po tree, like the sun, topping the hill.



回中牡丹為雨所敗二首
 下苑他年未可追
 西州今日忽相期
 水亭暮雨寒猶在
 羅幃春香暖不知
 舞蝶殷勤收落蕊
 佳人惆悵卧遙帷
 章臺街裏芳菲伴
 且問宮腰損幾枝

Peonies Spoiled by Rain at Hui-Chung: Two Poems

We can't return
to those years at Lower Park.

Today, in this western county
suddenly we meet again.

The pavilion by the water,
the same chill of evening rain.

The silk mat offers the fragrance of spring
but we know none of its warmth.

In the scattered pollen
no dancing butterflies gather.

But behind a distant screen
rests a woman beautiful in her sadness.

The street within Chang Terrace
is lined with luxurious grass.

May I ask now how many blades bent
like the waists of palace ladies,
have been damaged?

浪笑榴花不及春
 先期零落更愁人
 玉盤迸淚傷心數
 錦瑟驚烏絃破夢頻
 萬里重陰非舊圃
 一年生意屬流塵
 前溪舞罷君迴顧
 併覺今朝粉黛新



Go ahead, laugh in your sleeve--
The pomegranate does
bloom too late for spring
but, I tell you, this early autumn rain
can make a person sad.
As a flood of tears on a jade plate
can hurt beyond measure,
the zither's startled strings continually
break dreams.
Ten thousand miles of gloom--not like the old garden.
All year a growing wish
to belong to drifting dust.
But when the Front Brook Dance stops
wheel around, you'll see.
These moments will seem fresh as powder and as fine.

銀河吹笙



悵望王銀河吹玉笙
 樓寒院冷接平明
 重衾幽夢他年斷
 別樹四鷓鴣昨夜敬馬
 月榭故香因雨發
 風簾殘燭隔霜清
 不須浪作綵山意
 湘瑟秦箏自有情

Under the Silver River

I gaze in disappointment at the Milky Way
and play my jade pipes.
The tower's wintry, the courtyard cold
and welcome this first light.
Under the heavy quilt an old dream
has come to an end.
Last night in the far tree
a hen flapped down from her roost
and was gone.
The moon over the arbor, then rain
and as the familiar scent rose, I remembered
wind on the screen, the guttering candle
set away from clear frost.
No need to rise from Mount K'ou like the prince.
The zither of Hsiang, the flute of Ch'in
carry enough feelings inside.

無題



相見時難別亦難
 東風無力石花殘
 春盡到死絲方盡
 蠟炬成灰淚始乾
 曉鏡但愁雲鬢改
 夜吟應覺月光寒
 蓬山此去無多路
 青鳥殷勤為探看

[Meeting is hard]

Meeting is hard,
leaving
even harder.

The east wind
trembles,
A hundred flowers wither
and drop.

The spring silkworm's threads
unwind then
end in death.

The candle
turns to ash, its tears
begin to dry.

At dawn it's sad
to see her dark hair
fade in the mirror,

at night, saying poems,
to feel the moonlight's chill.

Penglai lies not far to the east.

In the west the blue bird
continually seeks out our way.

THREE

Relics

Like my family I keep everything, I say,
and search tilting stacks
for a box sturdy enough
and deep. From shadow then, a voice
calls me back to the smell of damp soil,
my grandfather's dahlias, the whistle he shaped
while turning the earth,
and I'm behind his closet door, hidden in coats and boxes,
knowing one box pushed beyond my reach
cradles a skull in straw.

And I see his story once more
caught in his eyes, the color
of ice building depth;
I'm taken to the mouth of a den
where among old kills and the scent of coyotes
her small skull seemed a rock first
in the half-light, then in his gut.
Close by her beads clustered frosty blue
against a calico skirt
stitched for a day she had flickered and danced.

Some nights she calls from this cave,
air rank as breath of grey beasts, and I don't know how
I can go to her.
I wonder if she comes to his
dreams this way, if he must keep on finding her
or if she runs at his side,
tossing flowers in her skirt, singing:

I am wind that bends clover, scattering seed.
I am pheasant whirring up through tall grass
and rabbit, finding refuge in sage.
I am white of first snow, the blue of larkspur.
I am dark that won't be contained,
the stillness you must answer
though your cry will be mine.

It's been years now we've kept him close,
ashes in a bronze box.
It may be he was just a white man and curious
but I know his winter eyes,
the coyote's call on wind--
a wild song--the soil that turns, hoarding death
in its secret place.

When A Mother Calls

The phone gives a startled cry
and she's there,
elbows on the chrome table,
an ashtray overflowing and the cup
laced too many times.

In it, her own mother's thick tongue,
her father's fruity smell, the head-on two sons
always on their way home.

All cool against the teeth, warm
in the belly and hushed.
She's a stream, free but brittle on the edge,
running its customary course
over shared terrain.

If she is failure,
I want to fold her sharp bones in my arms
and be dutiful
till I can turn aside.

If she is self-pity,
I want to taste her salty cheek and know
when I've had enough.

If she's a sadness that comes
of love, and I think she is
when she says, Time
you were getting on your way,
she lets me go
with a cup of blessing, an awkward grace
I drink. I drink all day.

The Man Who Saw Birds

Hunched at the table, he felt again
each bite of shovel into sand and rock, wind
flapping around him, tattered shreds
of a thing he once held.
He wanted an end to the barbwired miles that tore
his hands, a stunted crow on every post,
an end to his failures, strange birds that
clawed at the sleeves of his pride and circled, pierced
the night with his name.

It was then she stepped
slipper and warm
from their bed and spoke his name, her
need to have him beside her--
He clenched his hand to strike at mileposts,
at the sound of wind or
wings in her voice, that hand
he wished to open,
to set adrift through her hair
as it unfurled and dipped, lay
tucked under once more at his feet.

Jazz Dancer

Pink tassels wave in the ease
of her turning hips and a beat
that builds like the breath of a man
too easy to please,
a man who thinks my body, like hers,
holds a summer field and the glow
and drift of sky
he could never tire of.
And I tie him to his word.

She gathers me in arms graceful
as a moment of honesty, and surprised,
I trace circles within circles I've lived,
try on her sweet girl smile and find
I've rehearsed it for men I loved
and some I didn't.
As she bows
I applaud us both:
pink satin bows, scarlet slippers,
shifting the weight of our spell.

Their Tune

How the keys blink and fall
beneath her fingertips.
And how he chuckles,
knowing with what measure
a night sky still quickens
at her certain touch.

Quickening: Zacharias Musing

Woman, your belly glistens with oil
in the moonlight. It heaves
with the strength of shorn lambs
come up from the washing
and if I were not dumb already
I would be, seeing your soft radiance.
Who knows the ways of a woman
or of God, both
turning in dreams of sons?
It's said he can bring up children, shimmering
like mist from the stones, and their names
are his, a balm poured out upon sand
and waters so still
we must bend low and listen, though in fear
to see our own image, wavering,
hear our own murmurings.
Though our own deeds rise in swarms
about our ears.
Yet he chose us, a voice said in smoke, overlooking
our barrenness, old age.
And this brings a new fear--
That this child carries word of my death.
His voice will whet lightning shafts
that rain about an old man's head, and set
the wilderness that is his life shaking.
Or an old fear, watching you move in the night--
There is no child
and my tongue, carved from stone.
Only on the flat taste of my days
a small amber drop, a sweetness, dissolving.

Naming the Man on Drury Lane

for Brandon

On the street of yellow rag
framed by pen-and-ink Tudors, a child
in skater's stride,
one arm, all on a plane, held up to hail,
the other extended, a coin in the flat palm.
Leaning into the exchange, the man balances on one
buckled shoe, its sole not sketched in.

This child in my lap sings out O's, round as
eyes, as pennies we stack one more time
and just one more.
Our answer loops back on the question till
I think he sees
the houses in all the dimensions of morning, the boy
both eyes wide and laughing, his arms fleshed out
and pumping evenly
as he runs toward this man, good as bread,
who would feed the child in sight,
the child I hold, a man who lives.
We have named him, we have said Yes
O Yes O

Directions of Dreams

He couldn't wait for the double bed to grow
narrow, the path of your dreams to light up
under stars, like the silly ones in your eyes,
at the end some tall stranger.

No man of dreams himself,
he hadn't gazed beyond the window, was it
fifteen years? Twenty? Long enough
for change to move in unnoticed
as though only furniture had been rearranged.

Yet that night before he left
he must have had a vision: you
at the closet door,
your body curtained white, your hand,
a moth fluttering.
At your feet clothes like empty cocoons--
the cotton dress meant for rocking
and stories,
a small hand resting on your breast;
faded jeans that reminded him of knees on warm sod,
plans strung out straight as bean rows;
the tailored suit, a little stretched about the hips.
Nothing fit, he knew
he couldn't stay.

Next your hem might catch on a beam
and ravel out the sill and away
to tangle through narrow streets, or loop across wide sky.

For a Woman at my Door

Accuracy is a thing with bars, a cage,
its door ajar and no bird in sight.
Though I can fill in her story
like my own
I turn images over like healing stones:
rain--the first small explosions on a dusty bough,
a fallen tree wrapped with moss and patches of blue
along a gravel road, then
the oval field that hung on my mother's wall:
A young man lies in the tall grass,
one arm across his cool forehead as
he imagines the amber sky
and a stream runs gilt edge to edge
and regenerative. Suppose she were there
where dawn and the wisdom of afternoon
meet in confident song, that hearing it,
she would rise at his side, her thighs round once more
and her hair like cornsilk sounding in the wind.
Then she could now go beyond this frame
in a graceful sweep that resembles flight
before the field draws inward
like the iris of an eye, immense and dark.

From Exile

after Li Ching-chao

I am at the corner
 of the sea,
 the edge of the heavens
 and I am thin,
 filled only with a quivering
 as water wavers meeting the sand.
 Yet of some things I am sure
 as bamboo
 is sure
 because it is hollow
 and can trail the wind.

The wind is cold
 and the lake,
 the lotus cups now shards upon the waves
 but tucked between their emerald leaves,
 crystal beads, enough to spangle another dawn
 in whose wide-mouthed light the gulls
 may dip and flash their wings.

Just so my few remaining urns, the ancient bronze,
 my own slight record.
 It is a warning to the learned, the accomplished,
 to all in this floating world
 who store things up
 as I did my husband's love, our poems
 and art, ten buildings full,
 the treasures of my nation
 fired by the Chin
 whose gods are brutes with acrid breath.

Now I have this small chamber and expectation
 like the space between my screen and door
 where Chao Ming-ch'eng no longer leaves
 his well-worn shoes.
 So many things I would like to write
 but I let go these few words
 as the clay bowl burns and lifts
 the sandalwood's amber heart.
 Know that I accept this churning
 under my slack belt.
 I welcome it, as I would
 a child. I close.